

International Conference on Intercultural Religious Education and Islamic Studies

Kavala, Greece, 10-11 October 2015

“Islam education for all - the Leiden Islam Academy”

Prof dr Maurits Berger LL.M.
Professor of Islam and the West
Center for Religious Studies
Leiden University

Introduction

Religious education is an intricate part of the freedom of religion. While some states interpret this freedom to mean that the state to guarantee the freedom of religion by facilitating religious education, others states, like the Netherlands, interpret this freedom to mean that the state should not interfere. Lately, however, religious education has also become an instrument in security strategies since radicalization among young Muslims in Europe is often blamed on the influence of foreign preachers or imams. The solution, so it is argued, is ‘homegrown’ Islam, in particular the training of imams within the European country where they will be preaching. This article will reflect on the Dutch experiences in this respect, with a particular focus on the way that Leiden University is developing new initiatives based on the lessons learned.

Background: Islam and religious education in the Netherlands

Islam and Muslims¹

While The Netherlands has a long history of the study of Islam, and for several centuries was even the country with the second largest Muslim population in the world due to its Indonesian colonies, it was only since the 1950s that large numbers came to reside in The Netherlands. The estimated number of Muslims is 950,000 Muslims (6 per cent of the population), mostly concentrated in the larger cities (where they make up 20-30 per cent of the population). The first mosque in the Netherlands was built in 1955; at the time of writing there are an estimated 500 mosques, most of which are situated in buildings that were renovated for that purpose. Two thirds are of Turkish and Moroccan origin, the others from Surinamese, Afghan, Pakistani, Arab and Bosnian origin. Most have the Dutch nationality; the first generation acquired through nationalization, the next generations by birth. The number of Dutch converts is estimated to be 1 per cent of all Muslims.

¹ See for an extended overview with literature references: M Berger, ‘The Netherlands’ in: J. Cesari (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of European Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

The issue of Islam seems to be mostly a generation question. Whereas the first generation identified primarily with their country of origin and Islam was to them part of a larger cultural identity, Islam has become a focus point of identity among the present (second and third) generation of Muslims. In doing so, many of them adhere to a 'pure' form of Islam, rejecting any cultural additions. That leads to a broad array of responses, ranging from girls rejecting the 'traditional' authority of their parents to choose their marriage partner, to others rejecting the society they live in as non-Muslim and therefore not worthy of their loyalty or allegiance.

This is the context wherein young Dutch Muslims are searching for Islamic answers to their many societal, religious and political questions. The problem with the Muslim community in the Netherlands, however, is that they lack political and religious authoritative figures. This can be partly attributed to the fact that most first generation Muslims were of very low educational and social background. It is only now that the first generation of Muslim students is entering the Dutch universities and colleges. This particular feature of the Dutch Muslim communities is important to our argument, as we will see later.

Religious education

Freedom of religion is interpreted in The Netherlands as religion being a private affair where state interference is to be absent. Therefore, no state funds are available for religious institutions, including education. Religious communities need to organize themselves, and fund their own religious buildings, education, and the like.

There is one exception that is the result of a political settlement in the past: private schools, including those with a religious identity, do receive state funding just like public schools. Both type of schools must adhere to the same educational curriculum and meet the same educational standards. The only difference between the two types of school is that the private schools (in Dutch: 'special' schools) may determine their own religious or other identity and make that identity part of the overall education. It is based on this format that since 1988 Islamic schools have been established, and by 2015 there are over 40 Islamic primary schools and 1 secondary school.²

The freedom to start any kind of theological education also exists on an academic level. The religious organization or university that wants to start such a program only needs to meet the academic standards set by the state in order to receive the official recognition as a 'university' program. For instance, an educational center that called itself 'Islamic University' was established earlier, but has not yet received state recognition as a university on all levels.

On a university level, two types of religious education exist. One is the 'normative' education that trains students in a particular theology – Catholic, Remonstrant, Protestant, etc. – in order for them to become ordained clergy in the respective church. The other type of education takes a double form (hence the name *duplex ordo*): the university provides an academic education that is not theologically normative, and the graduates will then continue their studies in the normative post-graduate education provided by their respective churches. In 2006, both a normative and a *duplex ordo* university started an Islamic theology program that was known as the 'imam-training'.

² My PhD students Marietje Beemsterboer and Bahaeddin Budak are currently writing their dissertations on the religious identity of Islamic schools.

Imam-training

The Dutch government's interest in religious education for Muslims, and imams in particular, already existed since the 1980s, but acquired specific interest after 2001 and particular 2004 (when Theo van Gogh, a well-known filmmaker and Islam-critic, was murdered by a young Muslim). While the issue was the same, the motivation was now entirely different. In the 1980s and 1990s, religious education had the government's interest as a matter of integration. For by that time it had become clear that the hundreds of thousands of 'guest workers' and their families would not return to their countries of origin – mostly Turkey and Morocco – but were here to stay. This did not seem to apply to imams, however, as almost all of them still came from abroad.³ The Dutch government therefore commissioned several reports on the need for imam training in the Netherlands.⁴ While the Dutch interpretation of the freedom of religion precluded any state interference in religious education, it was strongly felt that the same freedom, combined with the need for proper integration, required that state should somehow facilitate such education in the case of imams.

But after 2001, the government's interest in the issue of imam training changed due to upcoming radicalization among Muslim youth, and was from now on motivated by considerations of security: it was suggested that one of the ways to counter radicalization among Dutch Muslims was to create an Islamic educational environment situated in the Dutch context. The products thereof, one aspired, were the so-called 'home-grown imams'.

Regardless of the motivation for an imam-training, pursuing this policy was problematic, however, due to the particularities of the Dutch separation of church and state: the government might wanted to establish Islamic theological training, perhaps even with the hope that it were to produce certain kinds of imams, but officially had no say in organization and content of Islamic education. Neither was the government allowed to provide Islamic organizations with funding for such endeavors. The government therefore took a back-road: it invited universities to provide such education (known as 'imam-training') whereby the government would fund the universities, and not the religious organizations involved. Three 'imam-trainings' were established in 2006, each in quite a different setting:

- The InHolland college in Amsterdam provided vocational training for students who would work as 'imams' in prisons, hospitals and army barracks, with Muslim instructors.

³ Turkish imams were recruited by the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs *Diyanet*, through the Turkish embassy in The Netherlands. Moroccan imams, on the other hand, were recruited and employed by individual mosques in The Netherlands. Imams from Surinam had an easier infrastructure to come and go due to the former colonial ties between The Netherlands and Surinam.

⁴ See a selection of government-commissioned reports: J. Waardenburg et al., *Religieuze voorzieningen voor etnische minderheden*, in opdracht van Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1983 ('Religious accommodations for ethnic minorities', commissioned by Ministry of Interior, 1983); N. Landman et al., *Imamopleiding in Nederland: kansen en knelpunten*, in opdracht van Min OC&W, 1997 ('Imam training in The Netherlands: Opportunities and Obstacles', commissioned by Ministry of Education, 1997); J. de Ruijter et al, Adviescommissie Imamopleiding, *Imams in Nederland: wie leidt ze op?* in opdracht Min OC&W, 2003 (Advisory Commission Imam Training, 'Imams in The Netherlands: Who will train them?' commissioned by Ministry of Education).

- The Free University in Amsterdam provided a 'normative' Islamic theological Ba and Ma program, with Muslim instructors.
- The university in Leiden provided a 'secular' Islamic theological Ba and Ma program, with an emphasis on the practice in The Netherlands, with mixed Muslim and non-Muslim instructors.

Where did it go wrong?

The college and Leiden University cancelled their programs in 2014 due to a lack of sufficient student numbers. The Free University in Amsterdam continued its program, partly because it benefited from the cancelation of the other two programs, but also because it was willing to sustain initial financial losses.

The universities were surprised by this lack of interest among Muslim students in these programs, in particular because it was known that there was an enormous thirst for knowledge about Islam among Muslims. This search for knowledge was shown by many evening courses organized by several private Islamic theological institutions, that were packed. So why did the many students who attended these evening courses not opt for an academic study offered at the top universities? A number of reasons can be advanced for their lack of enthusiasm:

- The financial prospects for imams in the Netherlands are not promising: since an 'imam' is paid by the individual mosque that appoints him, and this mosque is financially dependent on private donations from its congregation, the salary offered to an imam is usually very limited. (This is typical for the Netherlands, because in Belgium, for instance, imams are state employees and receive according salaries.)
- While there is a definite interest among young Muslims in everything that is related to Islam, it does not decide their choice of post-secondary school education. Since most of these Muslims represent the first generation of Muslims that goes to university (their parents are oftentimes illiterate or poorly educated), they choose studies that offer them respectable careers, like law, medicine, business or engineering. Very few will make the choice for a full time bachelor in Islamic Theology.
- The universities had a hard time offering a single program that would cater to the needs of all. By contrast, the many Islamic organizations in the Netherlands offering courses on Islamic theology represented a veritable mosaic of differentiations in ethnic background and religious orientation within Islam.
- Many students who did show an interest in the Islamic Theology programs were dissuaded because they found the programs not 'authentic' enough. They had expectations of leaving university like walking bookshelves with the ability to recite in fluent Arabic from Quran and Hadith. Apart from the fact that such a learning tradition belongs to the religious seminary and not to the university, a 3-year bachelor could never instill such knowledge in students, most of whom still need to learn Arabic in the first place.

- In addition to the previous expectation, the Dutch universities offering these programs were not considered authoritative enough. The measure stick of a 'good' Islamic Theology program were the programs offered by Islamic institutions of international renown, like Azhar, Medina, Damascus or Fez. The Dutch programs could not – and, in the case of Leiden: did not want to – live up to those standards.
- Finally, many devout Muslims expressed suspicion vis-à-vis the motives of a Dutch university to provide Islamic Theology programs. Some thought there were ulterior motives (and, in fact, they were right), others expressed reservations to universities in general.

Crossing the university walls

We evaluated our abolished Islam program, not on content, but on market value: since it is mostly Muslim students that we want to cater to, what are their needs and expectations in terms of Islam studies? Based on our own experiences and that of our colleagues in other universities, a ministerial evaluation,⁵ and a survey that we privately commissioned,⁶ we came to the following conclusions.

First and foremost, the lack of students at our universities was not for a lack of want, because this Muslim generation was more pious than the previous and in dire need of knowledge about Islam. What the universities had miscalculated was that these students would not pursue full university programs of Islam; Islam was important, very important, to many, but not exclusively. Most pious Dutch Muslims would follow evening or weekend courses on theology offered by Islamic organizations as *an addition* to their studies or work in other fields.

In addition to the Muslims there was also a vast Dutch society that was eager to learn more about Islam. Moreover, the Dutch government in its concern about radicalization among Muslim youth was equally concerned about anxieties and discrimination vis-à-vis Islam and Muslim that were disrupting the social fabric of Dutch society. However, this eagerness for knowledge about Islam in Dutch society was hampered in a similar way as it was among Muslims: no-one was willing to spend three full years studying it.

Based on these considerations we decided that the university had to adopt a different strategy. If the student won't come to the university, the university must come to the student. And that broadens the scope of the notion of the 'student' of a 18-years old who graduated from high school, to a much wider public of people who have already studied and are working, but want to deepen their knowledge. Some of them are in need of knowledge on Islam for professional reasons – like diplomats, bankers, police, government officials – while others have a personal or general interest.

Our next decision was that our university should not try to teach a normative form of Islamic theology. That was already being taken care of by the many Islamic organizations. We, as universities, had to focus on our strength, which was the wider

⁵ L. Heuts et al., *Evaluatie Islam- en Imamopleidingen in Nederland*, in opdracht van Min van OC&W, 2012 ('Evaluation of Islam- and Imam training in the Netherlands, commissioned by Ministry of Education, 2012).

⁶ Motivaction, *Verkenning van de Vraagstukken waar Moslims in Nederland mee van doen hebben*, november 2013 (in the author's possession).

spectrum of 'Islam' beyond theological and exegetical issues: Islam's civilization, history, philosophy, political Islam, current affairs, Islamic medical ethics, Islamic economics, etc. In focusing on these issues, we could as Leiden University reassert our neutral, objective and academic approach.

It turned out that this approach was very much appreciated by Muslim individuals, stakeholders and organizations. It kept them in charge of 'their' Islam, and they could turn to universities for all additional information that they needed. And, as it turned out, that need was quite extensive. Islamic organizations approached us with requests for course on specific issues, like current affairs in the Middle East, the history and concept of the caliphate and Islamic state, Islamic ethics, etc. During the weekends they had hundreds of Muslim members coming for courses in Quran and Hadith, they told us, but they could not provide answers to their many questions on all those other Islam-related issues. And that is where we come in.

The Leiden Islam Academy – innovative, but why?

This may all sound quite simple, but it is not from a university perspective. Universities are structured, organizationally as well as financially, to enroll students for longer periods of time. Short courses to be taught outside office hours to people who were not enrolled as students – that was a completely different ball game. To arrange that, we established the Leiden Islam Academie, that offers short courses ('modules') to a wider public and tailor-made courses to professionals. Since our primary focus was the Dutch public, these courses were to be taught in Dutch (hence the Dutch word *Academie* rather than the English *Academy*).

The difficulties that came with establishing this Academie prompted us to address the need to do so in the first place. Why going through all this trouble, and why not settle for a small Islam minor within the university curriculum? We had three reasons why this approach is worth the trouble:

Moral obligation

Although universities in the Netherlands – as anywhere in the world, so it seems – are increasingly based on business models, and are mostly concerned with their international ranking within the academic community, we maintain that any university that receives state funding has (also) an obligation to disseminate its knowledge to society. This is in particular the case with topics that are so on people's minds as Islam.

Financial necessity

While this moral obligation may qualify us as 'education communists' we do not close our eyes for the financial aspects. Yes, the university of the future needs to address the needs of a wider public than only its students, but no, this does not have to be done for free. For that purpose we are developing business models that may also be usable for other university departments. But it must be said that this is the trickiest part of this initiative, because the financial constructs of universities are extremely complex. We may therefore have to turn to the government for financial assistance in this endeavor.

De-radicalisation

In a country torn by radicalizing Muslim youth and by a society that seems to be ever-dividing ('polarizing') along religious and ethnic lines, our program contributes to what is called 'de-radicalisation' and 'de-polarisation'. We do what universities do, and that is finding, producing and disseminating knowledge. In doing so, we argue that as universities we can (and should) not teach Muslims the 'right Islam', but provide them with the broader picture of Islam's rich legacy and so contribute to the de-radicalisation of youngsters who are stuck in a very narrow image of Islam. Similarly, a wider Dutch audience, that has to rely on the news flashes to get information on a topic that is very much to their interest, is now provided with courses with a sufficient degree of depth but shorter in time than the full university courses so that one is willing to spend one's evenings taking them.

Conclusion

A government prescribing forms of religious education for specific religious communities is bound to fail for numerous reasons. One is that religious communities will not have others telling them what their religion is, or should be. In this they have the freedom of religion of religion on their side. Moreover, if the government's motivation is prompted by considerations of security, then the recipients will even be more suspicious if not downright angry, as it is based on the assumption that the Muslim student is a potential radical that will loose his or her radicalism through this particular kind of education.

These are among the lessons learned in the Netherlands. In addition, there are particular issues of a typical Dutch nature, such as the lack of institutionalization among Dutch Muslim communities, their recent presence in the Netherlands, and their mosaic diversity. Moreover, while the interest in Islam among Dutch Muslim youth is enormous, their choice of study is motivated by more pragmatic considerations.

The Leiden Islam Academie has taken all this into account, and has ventured on a new road of Islam education. This program is predominantly *inclusive* in that it addresses *all* Dutch, Muslim as well as others. It is also *non-normative* in that it does not teach Islam as the tenets of a theology but Islam as a theological science and as a civilization and culture, in past and present. Finally, the program has *no agenda* other than knowledge; we have been often asked by Muslims whether we teach 'true Islam' or by politicians whether we teach 'liberal Islam' – we do not do either: we teach Islam, as scholars do, with a keen eye for its current manifestations in our society.